



TO WHAT EXTENT HAS THE DEPENDENCE ON ALCOHOL AND DRUGS AS A FORM OF “SELF-MEDICATION” CAUSED MORE HARM THAN HEALING WHEN RECOVERING FROM CHILDHOOD TRAUMA?

Mervivian Trizabeth Ng

Impact & Research Fellowship Program, Harvard Student Agencies. In collaboration with Learn with Leaders.

ABSTRACT

The harmful impact of alcohol or drugs dependency on an individual's physiological, sociological, and mental state is highly recognized and common knowledge within today's society; thus, it is reasonable to start with the premise - one that is popularly believed and widely proven - that alcohol and drug dependency, which more often than not lead to addiction, is much more destructive than it is helpful. This research aims to explore, evaluate and conclude the impact of alcohol and drug reliance - comprehending if depending upon substances thoroughly harms an individual affected by childhood trauma or if there exists an underlying need that explains the acts of many who have fallen into it. This paper primarily examines the effects of drugs and alcohol substantially through comparisons established by the statistical and analytical studies that were undertaken while taking into account key variables. One prominent variable is accessibility. Understanding the extent to which this or other forms of recovery methods are accessible within a given scenario is crucial when deciding whether alcohol or drug dependency is the only or, in some cases, the best step that an individual can take to relieve the repercussions of childhood trauma. Further highlighting the understanding of how trauma can make one feel physically and emotionally unsafe and its paralyzing long-term repercussions, causing individuals with little to no choice but to self-medicate through alcohol and drugs to find emotional support. In a broader context, this paper is constructed to further explore the correlation between childhood trauma and drug or alcohol dependencies, with a potential cause-effect relationship. Statistically, more than a third of young children with reports of maltreatment or neglect will establish a drug or alcohol dependence before turning 18 years old.

KEYWORDS: Alcohol, drug reliance, accessibility, trauma, dependency, self-medication.

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to understand the depth of outcomes of using alcohol and drugs within individuals who have experienced trauma as a child - the bad and the good (Time Magazine, 2018). It is reported that 55 to 60 % of all PTSD patients develop heavy drug reliance, a claim supported by the American Psychological Association (APA). Based on this statistic, it is reasonable to question the plausible existence of a correlation between substance dependency and past trauma. Inspecting this plausibility is a crucial element to comprehend the stands and role of alcohol and drugs in today's society, which is required to assure the aspect of its practicality. What is hoped to achieve through establishing this comprehension is to discern between the 'needs' and the 'wants' of individuals, and as long as these substances are still within an individual's 'needs', one cannot say that it is entirely harmful.

The importance of answering this question is to discover the proper approach we must take when handling substance dependency on individuals suffering from the repercussions of childhood trauma, we must face it with consideration and comprehension, by proving that these substances have their place in this society and there is a real reason why people fall into dependency. This paper attempts to present to its readers how individuals with childhood trauma must be met. The end goal is to treat individuals who use these substances not with judgment and ignorance, but through the comprehension that they are the victims of their circumstances. This research will primarily be done through the evaluation of various relevant secondary sources, in the forms of quantitative figures that are derived and delved deeper by experts, which were published under legitimate and trusted institutions.

Methodology

The question, at its core, seeks to acknowledge that these individuals were often left without a choice. Delving deeper into their circumstance, one can observe the absence of alternatives; thus, assessing the role and extent to which alcohol and drugs affect our people's lives is imperative. Perhaps, it plays a crucial role that is yet to be replaced. We first observe the lifelong and day-to-day challenges of trauma faced by these individuals which will enable us to understand the gravity of the issue of trauma. Next, it is important to acquire a comprehension of the effect of substance use without considering its external factors. The side effects of substance use within its users' lives must be observed objectively. After understanding this, a comparison is gained by inspecting the available alternatives and the causation behind choosing alcohol and drugs. Understanding this will assist individuals in gaining a clearer view of drugs and alcohol's stance in today's society. In the discussion, the place of substances in today's society are observed - if it does provide something substantial, such as comfort, then their existence is unfavorable, but still needed in today's society. An alternative to this option should be explored. The paper is concluded with view of drugs and alcohol in today's society, and ultimately answer the question, "To what extent has the dependence on alcohol and drugs as a form of "self-medication" caused more harm than healing when recovering from childhood trauma?"

Result

Childhood trauma may result from abuse, neglect, or disturbing altercations from an individual's childhood. It is, first and foremost, important to comprehend the term childhood trauma. Trauma springs from past experiences- in this case, from childhood- but trauma itself is a form of manifestation; it is what blossoms from within an individual, which is to be discerned from the experience itself. (Kolk, 2021) An experience may be traumatic, but trauma is the byproduct of one's response to a traumatic experience. The development of trauma within an individual arises from the disconnection of an individual's conscience towards their own emotions and physiological state, making it difficult to be in the present moment and perceive the present moment as it is. The world, themselves, and other people will appear grim and unwelcoming, and they will develop a negative view of most things, creating a defensive bubble that detaches them from the rest of the world (Mate, 2022). Additionally, a child's brain develops at a much faster pace, resulting in their brain being significantly more sensitive towards their environment; what they undergo as a child usually wires their brain long-term and becomes the building blocks of how they perceive the world as an adult. Childhood trauma will affect an individual's day-to-day activities and significantly impair their overall long-term quality of life.

Childhood trauma is more prevalent than is traditionally believed, and its repercussions on emerging adulthood and older teenagers operating go beyond just post-traumatic stress, depression, and anxiety (William E. Copeland, 2018). Most children encounter it at some point; by the time they are 16 years old, most have all experienced at least one trauma. Research has shown that childhood trauma increases the risk of other future mental health issues, called latent vulnerability- latent vulnerability refers to the way in which neurocognitive and biological systems adapt to early adverse environments in ways that may confer short-term functional advantages, but increase the future risk of poor psychiatric outcome (McCory Et al., 2017). In these patterns of adaptations, one example being hypervigilance, an individual is unable to read social cues, which results in difficulties maintaining relationships, and they lose the support they need from others- a process called social thinning.

Secondly, it is important to understand the definition of developing dependency, as it is to be told that dependence, although it may lead to addiction, does not always result in one apart from addiction. Similarly, an individual suffering from addiction does not always suffer from dependence. Addiction is the habit that is manifested- it is a pattern of behavior; on the contrary, when an individual is dependent, they experience physiological or psychological withdrawal symptoms with the stop usage (Nick, 2021). Although it is distinct, it is extremely important to note that one often leads to the other and that both are extremely harmful with long-term effects that can be fatal. However, what must be understood is that dependencies on drugs and alcohol, which serve to alleviate the repercussions of childhood trauma, are merely an attempt to solve the problem. The true problem at hand is the consequences brought about by childhood trauma. The loss of self is the essence of trauma; thus, recovering and healing by reconnecting with one's emotions and body is our true aim and the purpose of

mental health and addiction treatment centers. (Mate, 2021)

The constant and uncontrolled usage of substances may lead to physiological side effects such as abdominal pain, weight loss, liver failure, stroke, and brain damage. Drugs and alcohol lead to changes in brain signals, causing psychological shifts. This will affect their social standings, as the usage of substances often leads to reckless and even violent behaviors that will affect people around them. There are enough grounds to conclude that these substances should be limited and used with professional guidance. In fact, there are significantly better alternatives- ones that are proven effective- investigated by the leading psychiatrist. Aside from psychotherapy, and talking to mental health providers such as psychologists or psychiatrists, a unique way to handle trauma is through EMDR, Neural feedback. Psychedelics. Yoga and theater are also known to be useful ways to reconnect with oneself, thus, is a method worth trying. The question is, why do substance uses remain prevalent in trauma survivors, despite the different choices that exist? Awareness is one crucial factor. Sometimes, it causes uncontrolled dependency on chemicals because individuals are not informed of their mental state, and with that, they fail to understand that other courses of action exist for their condition. The other fact is that these alternatives are time-consuming, and, for the most part, come with a price. This restricts its accessibility- meaning it is not that individuals refuse to be better- some simply do not have the privilege to. They may live in poverty filled with daily hardship, which leaves them with no choice. They are deprived of time and money. Hence, for many, it is an inevitability, not a choice.

Discussion

An analysis that examined people who had endured abuse revealed that it prompted regular, extraordinarily high degrees of stress, which hampers healthy brain development. Prolonged stress brought on by repeated trauma triggered physiological stress reactions that, with age, disrupted the internal structure of the sensory organs and may make more people who encountered traumatic events as children more susceptible to substance misuse disorders. (Dane O'Leary, 2021) Many of those who are invariably unable to obtain adequate treatments, such as therapy and medications, begin using alcohol or other drugs to self-medicate. (Carolina Center for Recovery, 2021) Ironically, those who inflict childhood trauma experience low self-worth, making them feel they are not entitled to additional help. Their propensity to utilize medicines for self-medication is subsequently enhanced by this. The truth of the matter is that alcohol intake or using drugs is still socially accepted, as a result, many people who are exposed to trauma as children are enabled to grow heavily reliant on addictive chemicals.

The lack of access to supportive resources pushes individuals to find solace in substances. The fact that substances provide the peace that they strive for shows that within a desperate situation, drugs and alcohol still remains as a source of relief that enables an individual to cope and function within their day-to-day lives where they are demanded. Within minutes of exposure to a traumatic event, there is an increase in the level of endorphins in the brain- at the time of the trauma- endorphin levels remain elevated and help numb the emotional and physical pain of the trauma, but this will gradually decrease, which may lead to a period of endorphin withdrawal that can last from hours to days, and because alcohol use increases endorphin activity, drinking following trauma may be used to compensate for this endorphin withdrawal and thus avoid the associated emotional distress. (Volpicelli et al., 1999) Thus, one must ask oneself if an individual who is in so much pain can truly cope and live through the day without alcohol and drugs, as substances do make living a bit more bearable, even if it is temporary.

However, without utilizing it reasonably and responsibly, substance dependence can lead to numerous social and economic issues for the person and their community, but the implementation of resources to support individuals' mental health may prove to be difficult, especially within the developing countries, where it is least implemented. There are socioeconomic problems with more urgency than the issue of mental health, they are much more essential, but at the same time, they are much more apparent. This can be due to the hidden nature of mental health issues. In the end, they are extremely prevalent but difficult to quantify. Implementing these facilities can be especially difficult if the culture or norm discourages it, just as the topic of mental well-being tends to be 'taboo' for the older generation growing up. What one must ask oneself is if an individual who is in so much pain can cope without alcohol and drugs or if they use it because it 'exists'. There is no inherent 'bad' to alcohol and drugs, they provide certain levels of solace and peace, the tendency to misuse these substances is what initiates negative repercussions and people who experience the effects of childhood trauma are especially vulnerable to misuse these substances. Alcohol and drugs can remain necessary to the general public and although they can accuse no harm if they are used with control, the risk of dependency and thus developing an addiction is not worth taking, being especially vulnerable to dependency.

Conclusion

It has been understood that the existence of this substance in our society is not without use, the main issue lies mainly in usage. A controlled and responsible use of drugs and alcohol will not significantly harm. However, individuals with a background of childhood trauma are extremely vulnerable to using these substances irresponsibly, for them, it may prove difficult to draw the lines between using what is 'pleasant' and being dependent, and thus, although the usage of substances such as alcohol and drugs are still common practice, it causes harm

towards an individuals' lives to a large extent. We must, however, be able to distinguish that the blame does not lie on the individuals, as they too are the victims of their own acts. What must be improved at the end of the day to reduce reliance on drugs and alcohol is providing help. Implementing proper institutions which can aid them in turning their lives for the better.

REFERENCES

1. Widom CS, Hiller-Sturmhöfel S. "Alcohol abuse as a risk factor for and consequence of child abuse." *Alcohol Res Health*. 2001; 25(1): 52-57. NIH.
2. Addiction & Mental Health Treatment in Western Pennsylvania, "The Link Between Childhood Trauma And Addiction In Adulthood", Silvermist, 2018.
3. Bessel van der Kolk, Ph.D. "What is trauma?", Big Think, 2021.
4. Gabor Mate, Ph.D. "How Childhood Trauma Leads to Addiction", After Skool, 2021.
5. William E. Copeland, "Traumatic Events and Posttraumatic Stress in Childhood". *PubMed*, 2007.
6. McCorty Et al., "Autobiographical memory: a candidate latent vulnerability mechanism for psychiatric disorder following childhood maltreatment", NIH, 2017.
7. Nick, "What's The Difference Between Dependence and Addiction?", June 2021.
8. Dane O'Leary, "The unfortunate connection between childhood trauma and addiction in adulthood.", *Old Vineyard*, 2023.
9. Carolina Center for Recovery, "How Does Childhood Trauma Lead to Addiction?", October 2021.
10. Volpicelli J, Balaraman G, Hahn J, Wallace H, Bux D. "The role of uncontrollable trauma in the development of PTSD and alcohol addiction." *Alcohol Res Health*. 1999;23(4):256-62. PMID: 10890822; PMCID: PMC6760386.